

## An Unexpected Message

The strangest part about the note was that Marcus did not remember ever buying the fedora he had found it in. He had just come back from picking up breakfast for himself and a few of the other young men at the orphanage, and had gone to put some change in a small jar on his shelf in the closet, when he noticed the peculiar hat. It was jet black with a pale pink feather, and Marcus felt certain he would have been able to recall making a purchase with such personality.

For starters, he didn't have much in the way of finances. And although he might enjoy sporting a fashionable blazer or eccentric pair of socks, he had never had an opportunity to become anything close to an expert in style. Furthermore, Marcus wasn't sure he would even know where to acquire the black and pink fedora even if he wanted to. The only hat shop in town that he knew of was a tiny one that sat along the curve of the Rhine, and from what he could remember most of its hats came in drab shades of grey and tan.

So it was with a mixture of curiosity and plain confusion that Marcus pulled the hat from the shelf, and he certainly did not expect a cream-colored card to fall to his feet. Glancing over his shoulder, feeling both as though he was committing an act he maybe should not and also like he wanted none of the other boys in on his secret, he snatched up the note.

It was blank.

Marcus turned the card over in his hand. In wispy letters that appeared bold in their very existence, he was saved from disappointment:

*Congratulations on finding me. If adventurous enough to seek more, come to 416 Schildergasse.*

*The choice is yours.*

He was just in the midst of attempting to process what he had read when he heard feet behind him and hurriedly slipped the note into his pocket.

“You coming?”

It was Finn, the only other fifteen year old at the orphanage and one of the few people that Marcus felt he could confide in about deeper things than favorite ice cream flavors or music tastes. And yet, he was glad Finn hadn’t noticed anything strange.

“Yeah,” Marcus searched his brain for any comment he could make that would explain his lateness to the assortment of bread and fruit that he himself had bought. At last, he remembered he’d purchased a jar of blackberry marmalade just because he’d wanted to try it. “Carlina isn’t mad about the extra marmalade, is she?”

“Nah,” Finn brushed the concern away with the wave of his hand. “She would be if she saw you stiffing her out of the change though.” He wore a wry smile as Marcus followed him out of their room.

That was what Marcus and Finn had really bonded over: their pact to keep the change from their errands for themselves. The first time they’d done it, they’d been picking up all of their formal attire from a local dry cleaner. The caretakers were taking the whole group to a show at the opera, and the boys were to be adorned in the crispest of linens. But it was hot. And none of them had volunteered to go, so Carlina took the task of volunteering Finn and Marcus.

They had let out their fair share of groaning, but still neither could justify why it always seemed like it was one of them who got chosen for the daily errands.

“Maybe she thinks we need to work on our legs,” Finn had suggested, and Marcus could clearly remember him examining his calves.

In reality, Marcus wasn’t sure whether Carlina truly did choose them more, or whether Finn was stretching the truth like he often did. Whatever the case, he knew that Finn was one of those people who were made to tell tall tales. Yet, whether a part of him was on Finn’s side or whether caught up in the moment, Marcus didn’t object to Finn’s remark as he counted the change in his palm.

With half the ironed shirts slung over his shoulder, Finn exclaimed, “Only eighteen dollars! She was so sure it would be twenty five.”

Marcus nodded, struggling to keep the grey and cornflower blue tops from slipping off his own shoulder and out of his arms.

“You know what, I’m keeping it.”

“You’re what?”

“I’m keeping it! She never checks our receipts anymore. She just takes them and shoves them in that desk drawer.”

Marcus shoved a paisley sleeve out of his face.

“She won’t even know,” Finn justified to himself, despite the lack of opposition.

Marcus hadn’t obliged, but he also hadn’t objected. From that day on, he too kept the change from an errand every now and then. He wasn’t bold enough to keep anything more than two or three dollars, and most of the time he only kept a few coins. For one thing, he thought keeping anything more would eventually arouse suspicion, and in truth he sort of

enjoyed the errands. He often took detours around the river and found the sparkle of the current lapsing in the sun to be inspiration for his poetry. Another hindrance was that Marcus had an inkling Carlina knew what they were up to after all. He could recall her inquiring about the price of the apple strudel he'd brought back one day soon after their little excursion to the dry cleaner – something she almost never did – and a few days later saw her smile at one of the receipts Finn had handed her. And yet, Finn was acquiring quite a collection of green and silver and bronze in his jar.

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Marcus had never eaten breakfast so fast. Nor had he ever paid so little attention to the food in front of him. He swore the note was tugging at his pocket, reminding him of its presence. But no reminders were needed for Marcus to think of the mystery that the morning had brought. Where had this hat come from? And from whom?

“You hardly ate anything!” One of the younger boys, who Marcus was actually quite fond of, had exclaimed as they filed out of the dining room.

Buying himself a second, Marcus ruffled Luis's bleach blond curls. “I guess I just didn't have an appetite,” he lied.

For any eavesdroppers it would have been obvious; Marcus was always ready to eat. But perhaps it was the youthfulness of the boy that kept him from objecting. Having already obtained permission from Carlina to take his evening stroll a little early, he skidded quickly out the door before anyone could ask any more questions. The only thing that kept him from leaving sooner was the inclination he felt to bring something along with him: the fedora. Slipping it under his arm, and scurrying down the steps to the main entrance, Marcus was acutely aware of Finn's curious eyes following him as he went.

Out in the freedom of the early day's breeze and away from the others, Marcus pulled the note out of his pocket and reexamined it. He had half expected to see a card blank on both sides, in which he would have to figure he had imagined the whole thing. That would be more logical, after all. So when he saw the wispy font staring up at him, he couldn't hide his grin.

He had never heard of any street named Schildergasse, and only now did it occur that he had no idea how on earth he was going to find it. If it even was a street. He could not fight the feeling that he couldn't just ask someone, in case that might somehow give away some kind of hint. A hint of what exactly, Marcus did not know. But he didn't question the feeling inside him. He knew that, today, he must put his gut before his brain, lest the day lose any of its magic. Glancing at the hat swinging by his side, he noticed for the first time that it had a small design. In gold stitching, eight thin lines overlapped, almost like a variant of a star.

But of course, whether star or asterisk, the emblem meant nothing to Marcus. He stopped and sat on a bench overlooking the river. Suddenly feeling a bit silly, he gazed out at the Rhine's current, as if expecting to find answers hidden in the heights and crevices of its waves. He should have brought his notebook along, then he could have at least made some progress in his latest poem and perhaps the whole trip would not be for naught. Equally frustrating, however, he had not had any new ideas for his poetry lately, and wondered whether the river would have even been able to work its magic.

Maybe, just like finding whatever Schildergasse was, he was overthinking the writing process. Not every poem had to evoke feelings of desire or woe. In fact, sometimes people found the greatest meaning in the simplest things. Like a hat.

He could always write about that. A poor, lost boy in a fedora. In a feeling that felt vaguely and strangely like instinct, Marcus put on the hat.

He blinked. Yes, he was still in the same dimension. He was still alone, sitting on this bench by the Rhine. He was indeed still wearing the black and pink fedora. But suddenly, he no longer had the sensation he was lost.

Marcus felt the note in his pocket like it was a weight. Only then did he realize he had begun walking. Not only that, but he seemed to be walking with a purpose.

Of course he was; he was going to 416 Schildergasse...

The dark beams on the timbered shops and houses smiled at Marcus as he passed them, as if saying their individual farewells as he became closer and closer to leaving his little nook Western Germany for the unknown. Surely he couldn't be traveling that far to 416 Schildergasse, but the intensity of whole thing was exasperated by the fact that Marcus had no clue what he would find when he got to his destination. Suddenly, it dawned on him that there was a chance he would find nothing at all. In fact, that was likely the more probable outcome. How could he have been so foolish to think the note had been some kind of funny invitation to his own fantasy story? He didn't even know who wrote it. Or why the note had been given to him. What if it wasn't even meant for him?

There must have been a mistake. Could the note have merely been a prank played by one of the boys? Abruptly, the smiles of the timbered shops and houses turned into sneers. But Marcus kept walking. Right down Amadeus Alley. Straight past the park where the children played fetch with the miniature schnauzer. Left at the bakery where he'd picked up the fresh loaves of bread only a little while ago.

It felt like several hours had passed since then. Back then, all that had mattered was blackberry marmalade.

THUMP.

Lost in thought, Marcus had not noticed the older woman rushing past him, an apron around her hips and bags in hand. The black and pink fedora toppled to the ground.

“Sorry, sir!” Rather than being directed right at him, the woman’s words were carried over her shoulder by the breeze, her gaze fixed in front of her.

“s’alright,” Marcus said more to himself than the woman.

Not only had he missed sight of her, but he seemed to have completely lost track of where he was going. How could he be sure these weren’t the same row-homes he’d passed earlier? He was at an intersection, and the decision of left or right sat like a lump in his stomach.

He bent down to pick up the fedora and righted it upon his head.

Left would do.

A few more timbered sneers and smiles and Marcus found himself facing a bustling section of shops and cafes. The first thing he noticed was that many of the passersby seemed to be wearing hats equally as unconventional as his own. A middle-aged businessman in a striped navy bowler hat. An woman in a floppy, big-brimmed hat with polka dots along its rim. A boy in a vibrant teal beret with the symbol of a spade like a playing card. Had all of these hats not steered his attention back to the fedora on his own head, he might have missed the golden plaque shining on the corner of the building nearest him: 428 Schildergasse.

He had to be close. Marcus hurried down the busy street, nearly running into people now himself. The place was a blur of legs and hats.

Four hundred and twenty six... 422... 417...

415 Schildergasse. Had he passed 416? He took another look to his left and sure enough the golden plaques read 417 and 415. One adorned a café with a white-and-red checkered awning; the other, a store that looked like musical instruments and antiques vied equally to be the main assets. Another double take confirmed that the ones on the right read 418 and 414, this time decorating a plant shop and retro ice cream parlor.

That's when the idea hit him. Marcus glanced up, expecting to see his destination nestled above the collection of indoor trees and succulents, but all he saw was what appeared to be attics or cozy apartments. But then he noticed the break between food and nature; separating the ice cream parlor from the plant shop was a narrow alleyway, despite the building maintaining its connection on the second story. Marcus slid through the alley, his blood pumping.

He came out on the other end none the wiser. Rather than finally discovering whatever it was he was even searching for, he found himself on a street that appeared much more residential. Pale blue mailboxes lined the way, and the sounds of the hustle and bustle of the previous thoroughfare died away. Despite the uniqueness in the neighborhood he was stumbling upon for the first time, Marcus could not deny the slight twinge of disappointment he was beginning to feel.

Turning back, the vibrant bustle came again into view. Framed ever so slightly by the dimensions of the current alleyway, he realized that another alley sat directly across from the one he was in now, between the café and antique store – if that's what the latter



really was. Bursting straight out of this narrow alley and into the next, Marcus hardly noticed the old man in the seemingly glowing top hat. At the end of this alley sat a river; whether Rhine or another he knew not. Yet just as he was about to reach the end, he took a step back. The thin space between the buildings expanded to the right, where the alley seemed to branch off. Just a few feet along this new branch, Marcus felt like he was standing in front of a suburban family home. It wasn't that he was facing anything of a grand scale, but nestled within what he figured must have been the outer confines of the antique store was a crimson door with a small set of steps leading up to it. In front of the door sat a rough-looking welcome mat that said *Come in!*

Beside the mat was a potted shrub, and Marcus couldn't help but wonder whether it had been purchased across the street. It was then that he noticed that, somehow, the plant was receiving light. Glancing up, he was nearly blinded by a tiny skylight all the way up past the second story, between the tunnel of concrete that was the neighboring buildings, that looked out into the sunny day's breeze. For such a small window, it sure let in a ton of light.

The light shone on a plaque seemingly brighter gold than all the rest: 416 Schildergasse. Marcus hardly stopped to ponder the fact that the building was on the wrong side of the street; he was too full of adrenaline. Without any hesitation, he reached for the doorknob and almost immediately realized he should not have been surprised at all to find that it was tightly locked. Why had he thought he would be able to get in?

But he had felt so sure. Despite not knowing where he was going or what he would find, he had felt so certain. It had felt so right.

Unwilling to quit, instinct reminded Marcus of the black and pink fedora. Yes, ever since he had put it on, he seemed able to go where he wanted even though he didn't know

how to get there. It was almost like magic. If the hat could lead him to a place he hadn't known to exist, why couldn't it guide him just a bit further and let him inside a building he did not know how to enter?

Marcus took off the fedora. In a manner that nearly mirrored the cream-colored card from earlier that morning, a sturdy brass key clanked to the ground and landed just in front of his feet.

The key was intricately patterned with lines and divots that made it resemble tree bark. Its three teeth jutted out in mismatched lengths, and at the opposite end was a circular head emblazoned to read:

*Mr. Müller's Magnificent Magic Hat Shop*

Unable to wait any longer, Marcus slid the key into the crimson-colored lock.